

Mockingbird

by Ceallaig

Category: Farscape

Genre: Romance

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2000-05-17 09:00:00

Updated: 2000-05-17 09:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 18:02:14

Rating: K+

Chapters: 1

Words: 5,061

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: at some point in the future, John and Aeryn embark on the future, together

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> <meta name="Generator"> MOCKINGBIRD _

Author's note: for the record, while there are certain similar elements between this story and two others, KATHERINE CRICHTON by Tanya, and WHILE MY LADY SLEEPS, by D.V. Sonne, this story was developed independently and without foreknowledge of either of those two excellent pieces. Great minds appear to think alike....

Thanks to Kitsah, for her invaluable advice, to Dori for aiding, abetting and suggestions, and to Tee for the original inspiration, and for sharing memories of a very special life experience.

This is for JaneGael ª I promised you a happy one this time, and here it is.....

- **

MOCKINGBIRD

**

By

Kelly Hill

In the darkened sitting area of his quarters, John took out his recorder. His old one had long since drained the batteries, but he had managed to swap it at a commerce planet for a unit that ran on rechargeable power cells. His was considered a curiosity, and the being he traded with thought he might have a buyer who would be interested, even if it didn't work. He had even thrown in the

recharger. After all this time, he didn't really have any hope that his father would get his 'letters' but sometimes it still made him feel good to record them. And so much had happened it was a good way to keep track. He switched it on and began to speak.

"Hi, Dad, it's me. I just got done tucking Nora in bed. Today was her third birthday, and I wish you could see her. She's getting so big, and she looks more like her mother every day. Smart, sassy, and a real handful sometimes, but the best daughter any father could want. And I can't help thinking sometimes how close she came to not being here at all...."

"Here it is, Aeryn, but I really think you need to tell John first, " Zhaan said.

"No, I â€“ "

"Tell me what?" John asked mildly as he entered the medlab. Both women looked up and the friction between them could have powered the generators for a small city. He felt the hair on the back of his neck start to rise, a sure sign of trouble. "OK, is someone going to speak up or do I get to play twenty questions â€“ animal, vegetable or mineral ?"

Aeryn just glared, her lips pressed into a tight thin line. It was the Delvian who finally answered, "Aeryn is pregnant, John."

John blinked â€“ of all the things he might have expected, this wasn't even in the top ten. Finally he managed, "Pregnant? But the implant "

"Expired, and I wasn't aware of it." Aeryn's eyes were blazing.

"You're sure, both of you?" he asked, turning to Zhaan first, who nodded. The realization started to sink in â€“ first a stomach dropping surge of shock -- pregnant....wow.... Then almost in spite of himself he could feel the grin start to spread across his face. Wow! "A baby," he said in a voice soft with wonder. "Aeryn, why didn't you tell " He reached for her hands and saw the small bottle there. Again the prickling on the back of his neck. "What's that?"

"John, this really is none of your business," Aeryn snapped. She went to move past him, but he grabbed her arm and spun her to face him.

"Hell it's not! What's in the bottle, Aeryn?" The look in her eyes confirmed his worst fears. Anger and betrayal flamed in his eyes. "You were going to take that and not ever tell me you were pregnant, weren't you? Dammit, Aeryn, how could you do it? How could you even think about doing it? And how could you give it to her?" he shouted, glaring at Zhaan, who would not meet his furious gaze. "It's not right, Aeryn. Whether you like it or not, I do have some say in this. We need to talk about it."

"This is my choice, John. There's nothing to talk about."

"No, you're not the center of the universe here. We do have to talk about this, and we are going to talk, now. Zhaan, would you

mi....." But the Delvian had already left unnoticed. John knew he had to be rational, though every fiber of his being wanted to scream. He took a deep breath to calm down and mentally counted to ten. "All right, it's just us now. Come over here, sit down, and tell me just what is going on in your head. Please, I need to know."

She let him lead her over to the bench in the corner of the room, and he could feel the tension pouring off her like a waterfall. She held the little bottle in her hand like a talisman, her knuckles turning white around it. Her face didn't show it, but John knew her well enough to see what was going on inside her. _My God, she's terrified! A woman who's faced armored battalions, hand to hand combat and stuff I'll probably never know about, and she's scared out of her mind right now! _John prayed silently for the right words to come, then took her free hand. "Look, Aeryn, I'm sorry I yelled at you. It was a shock, and it hurt that you didn't want me to know. I know this is a lot to deal with â€“ I'm not doing so hot myself â€“ but this is a big decision, and it's can't be rushed. C'mon, talk to me; what's the problem?"

"I'm trying to be practical, John. This is hardly the time or place to have a child."

"Aeryn, children are probably the most impractical things in the universe. And I've got a news flash for you â€“ there has never been a good time or place to have them. All over my world, and probably every other world too, there's always some kind of dren going down â€“ fighting, disease, overpopulation, whatever. Hell, I was born in the middle of a war! My dad was a Navy pilot, and could have been called up any time. That didn't stop him and Mom. Sometimes the idea of children â€“ the hope for a future â€“ is all that keeps people from giving up. What else?"

"I don't know anything about family, John. I've never had one. Until I came here, I spent my life as a soldier. What kind of mother would I be?"

"You think because I had a family I know all about them? Kids don't come with how-to manuals â€“ you learn as you go along. And you're gonna blow it sometimes, so am I, everyone does. You just hope and pray you don't blow it too much or too often. And I promise you, I'll be there every step of the way."

"That's another thing. What if we find that precious wormhole of yours and you get the chance to go home? What then?"

John's voice was sad as he answered. "I think we both know that's not going to happen; it's high time I admitted it to myself. The chances that I'll find one that's stable, and that will lead me back to Earth, are so remote it's not worth thinking about. It made for a nice daydream, and gave me something to hope for. Now I have something different to pin my hopes on, something even better."

John saw the grip on the little bottle relax slightly, felt the tension ease a fraction, and that gave him hope. "Listen, don't make a decision now. Please think about it for a while, a day or two at least. If you decide you really want to use that, I won't try to stop you."

"You won't forgive me, either." Aeryn's voice was so quiet John had

to strain to catch the words.

"Yes, I will. Like you said, in the end it's your choice. Just don't let panic make it for you. Please think about it."

For two days Aeryn avoided John as much as possible, even going back to her old quarters to sleep. He wanted desperately to reach out to her, hold her, tell her that everything would work out, but he knew this was a battle she had to fight alone. So he waited, alternating between hope and despair.

Late in the night of the second day, she came to him, waking him out of a fitful sleep. She was still dressed, and had evidently not seen her own bed that night. She sat on the edge of the bed, poised to bolt if he so much as touched her. One fist was tightly clenched, and John had no doubt what was in it. As he switched on the light, he saw the look in her eyes and his heart sank. _She's going to do it_, he thought. _Well, at least she's letting me know first_.

Her words, when they finally came, surprised him. "John, are you sure this is the right thing to do? Having a child, now? Doesn't it frighten you at all?"

He smiled, took her free hand in both of his, and squeezed it gently. "No, I'm not sure, and yes, I'm scared. It might just be the most colossal mistake any two people ever made. But in here" " he pulled her hand to his chest, letting her feel the accelerated beating of his heart, " in here it feels right. I don't know how to explain it any better than that."

Slowly her clenched fist unfurled, and she held the bottle out to John. He took it from her gently, placed it on the floor, and gathered her into his arms. She slid in beside him on the bed, hugging him like a child in the dark clings to a teddy bear for comfort. He held her close through the remainder of the night , kissing, caressing, murmuring soft words of love and reassurance. Long after she'd fallen into exhausted sleep, he lay awake, contemplating the future, and the awesome, wonderful responsibility he faced.

"You want to what?"

"Get married" or as close to it as we can manage out here in the middle of nowhere. I don't know how legal it would be, but I think Zhaan will perform the ceremony."

"Why do you want to?"

"I'm an old fashioned kinda guy" I believe in marriage before kids, even if it's only a few months before. C'mon, it's high time you made an honest man out of me." His grin faded and his eyes became totally serious as he took her hands. "Aeryn Sun -- friend, companion, lover and soon to be mother of my child -- will you do me the honor of accepting me as your husband?

She met his gaze with hers, and the great blue eyes were shining with more than just incipient tears. "Yes, John," she whispered. "And thank you."

The ceremony was held on the terrace. D'Argo walked Aeryn in, his

vision blurring with unshed tears as he took the Sebacean's hand and put it in John's. Rygel and Chiana flanked them, the Nebari uncharacteristically silent, and the Dominar preening as if the ceremony were for him. Zhaan, resplendent in her priestly vestments, performed the ritual of joining, her face shining with joy. After an invocation to the Goddess to look down on them, she asked, "Do you, John Crichton, accept this woman fully, and with a free heart?"

"I do."

"Do you, Aeryn Sun, accept this man fully, and with a free heart?"

"I do."

"If either of you have anything to say, you may do so now."

John took both of Aeryn's hands in one of his, and laid his other hand on the soft swell of her belly. He looked down into her eyes and said, "I made a promise once that I would never leave you. I make that promise again, to you, and to our child, to love, honor and protect both of you, to the last moment of my life. Where you are is where I will be, from this day on."

Aeryn took both his hands in hers. "And I promise to love, honor and protect you and our child to the end of my days. My life is with you, and my heart is yours."

Zhaan reached out to place a hand on each of their shoulders, and recited the words that had been so long absent from her vocabulary: "In the presence of the Goddess, under the eternal stars, and before these witnesses, I pronounce your two souls one, now and for all time to come. You may kiss your beloved."

John tilted Aeryn's face up slightly and kissed her softly, reverently, aware of the enormity of the step he had just taken, his heart full to bursting. Aeryn responded by pulling him closer and deepening the kiss, wishing the perfection of this moment could last forever. A peace she had never known before washed over her. Life was growing inside her, a life created from the love of two people, and there was no longer room for fear or doubt.

D'Argo was intent on the project before him on the workbench and didn't notice John's presence until the human spoke: "Hey, big guy, got a minute? I need to ask you a favor."

The Luxan laid aside the sander and gold-toned wood he was working on. "What is it?"

"There's a custom among my people â€“ well, some of them, anyway â€“ to ask a person to be a godparent to their child. If anything happens to the parents, the godparent promises to take over. Aeryn and I would like to ask you to be our daughter's godfather. We can't think of anyone we'd rather have look after her if we can't."

"Daughter?"

John grinned. "Yeah, Zhaan told us today. Funny, I always thought I'd want the first one to be a boy, but I'm liking the idea of a girl

more and more. Maybe she won't be as big a pain in the ass as I was when I was a kid."

"I'm sure that would not be a difficult feat for her to manage," D'Argo commented dryly. The expression in his eyes softened. "There is a similar tradition in my culture. The people who took my son to safety after my arrest were his *t'al-ana*, his protectors. It is considered a great honor to be so chosen."

"We'd be honored if you'd accept. You've laid it on the line for both of us more times than we can count. We know you'll do the same for her."

"I accept, and thank you. Have you chosen a name yet?"

"Not really, but I'm sort of leaning toward Nora. That was my mother's name." John indicated the various pieces of wood and metal on the workbench. "Building another shilquin?"

"No â€“ something else." There was a smile in the Luxan's eyes. John waited for further comment, but D'Argo didn't elaborate. *Secrets hmmmm*

— —

John's comlink beeped. "John, can you come up to command?"

"Be right there, Zhaan." John held out his hand to D'Argo, who enveloped it in his own. "Thank you. Have fun making . . . whatever this is."

"I will." John left, and D'Argo smiled. The pattern he was working from was identical to the one he had used to build Jothee's first cradle. He hoped to build another one day for Jothee's child, but until that day came, he was content to make one for his . . . his *t'ayla*. A pride he never thought to feel again warmed his hearts, and he picked up the golden wood and sander again. He had much work to do.

"D'Argo said yes," John told Aeryn later as they readied for bed. He helped her adjust the voluminous T shirt over her stomach and got her settled comfortably.

"Good, that makes me feel better."

"Me too." Aeryn gasped and grimaced. "Are you all right?"

"That one got me in the ribs. She'll be a star volpa player when she grows up, I can tell already."

"She kicked you?" She nodded, smiling. He sat next to her on the bed and his face split in a wide grin as her stomach lurched again under his hand. "Oh, wow..." he breathed. He looked at his wife's face and her smile was nearly as broad as his. "Have I told you lately how gorgeous you are?"

"Gorgeous? I'm the size of a small asteroid!"

"I wish you could see yourself the way I see you. Your face is glowing, your eyes seem like they're even bluer than they used to be,

and when you smile babe, when you smile, there's not a sunrise in all of creation that can top it. Being pregnant agrees with you " I may have to keep you this way."

"Over your dead body," she shot back, but her grin took any potential sting out of the words. "Ow, there she goes again. Time to settle down, little one. You can score another goal tomorrow."

John turned out the light and got into bed. Sliding down, he got his head level with her stomach and, propping himself on one elbow, began to hum. "What's that song?"

"An old, old one. Listen up, Nora, this is from your gramma." John smiled in the darkness and began to sing:

_ "Hush, little baby, don't say a word_

—

Papa's gonna buy you a mockingbird

If that mockingbird don't sing

—

Papa's gonna buy you a diamond ring...."

—

"Doesn't make much sense," Aeryn said.

"It's not supposed to. It's a lullaby, to make her go to sleep."

_ "If that diamond ring turns brass_

—

Papa's gonna buy you a looking glass

If that looking glass gets broke

Papa's gonna buy you a billy-goat...."

—

John crooned softly through the rest of the verses, and concluded with:

_ "So hush, little baby, don't say a word_

—

Papa's gonna buy you a mock-ing-bird."

—

"That was nice," Aeryn said as he came back up beside her. "Sing it again " for me this time."

"My pleasure." Aeryn got comfortable and closed her eyes, and John stroked her dark hair gently as he went through the song again, listening as her breathing became deep and even. "Good night, my loves," he whispered. "Sweet dreams, both of you."

"All right, Aeryn, one more push that's it and there she is!" Zhaan eased the squirming newborn out into the world, cleaned out the baby's nostrils and rubbed her limbs. She was rewarded with a lusty, somewhat indignant squall. "Well, there doesn't appear to be anything wrong with her lungs," the Delvian laughed.

"Congratulations!"

"Relax, babe, the hard part's over. You did great," John murmured, stroking Aeryn's damp hair off her forehead. "I am so proud of you." She gave him a tired smile and squeezed his hand in acknowledgement.

Zhaan clamped, cut and tied off the umbilical cord. "Everything seems to be in good working order. It's time for your daughter's first bath, John -- do you want to do the honors?"

"Actually, that's the _t'al-an's _job ... right, D'Argo?" John grinned at the look of amazement on the warrior's face, and was glad he had consulted Pilot about Luxan customs. The _t'al-an's presence in the birthing chamber and the first bathing were millennia-old rituals that served to bind the participating families forever. It didn't make a lot of sense to him, but when in Rome ... "Go for it, big guy. You'd probably do a better job than me, anyway."

D'Argo's eyes were glistening as he took the infant from Zhaan, her tiny form almost disappearing in his large hands. Memories both sad and sweet flooded his mind as he gently bathed her, memories of another time, another place, another child. He laughed as one minute fist reached out blindly and yanked a red-gold braid. "You're strong -- we'll make a warrior of you yet, little one, and never mind what your father thinks," he told her as he dried her and wrapped her in a soft blanket.

As he laid the baby gently in her mother's arms, Aeryn looked up at the infinite tenderness and sadness in his blue eyes. He had gone from hated adversary to unwilling ally to trusted friend in the last cycle and a half, and her heart broke for him now despite her own joy. He'd known he wondered of fatherhood, and had had it ripped from him by one of her own people. No, she corrected herself, not one of hers, not any more. These people, in this room, and those waiting outside -- they were her people now, her family. The smile she gave D'Argo was bright. "Thank you."

She touched the soft down of black hair on her daughter's head with a tentative fingertip, gazed into unfocused blue eyes and marveled at the delicacy of tiny fingers and toes. The landscape of her life had been gray and battle-scarred, and now, blooming in the desolation, was one perfect rose. "She's ... just beautiful," she whispered, her eyes swimming with tears.

"Of course she is -- she looks like her mother," John said as he leaned forward to plant a soft kiss on her forehead. As he straightened, he saw Aeryn's eyes drifting shut, defeating her best efforts to keep them open. "And I think it's time Mom took a nap. She's had a very long day. Let me have Nora. She'll be here when you

wake up."

Aeryn surrendered the baby reluctantly, and John held his daughter for the first time. Tiny and fragile, strong and vital, so right in his arms, like they had been waiting for her presence there. He smiled, and the knot of fear that had lain coiled in his stomach from the moment Aeryn had gone into labor suddenly loosened. Tears welled in his eyes and slid down his cheeks, and he made no attempt to hold them in check. "She's the most amazing thing I've ever seen. My daughter our daughter. I love you both so much"

Nora began to fuss in her father's arms, and Aeryn smiled. "Sing for her, John, it's always calmed her down before. Sing for both of us."

His voice wavered on the first notes, but became stronger as he went on. By the time he reached the verse

_ "If that cart and bull turns over_

-

Papa's gonna buy you a dog named Rover...."

-

both his ladies were asleep. He finished in a near-whisper, and laid Nora in her waiting crib. She stirred slightly but did not wake as John tiptoed toward the door. He beckoned, with a finger to his lips for silence, and Chiana and Rygel entered.

Chiana looked Nora over. "Well, she's not very big," she whispered dismissively, "but I expect she'll grow. And she is pretty cute. You did okay. You'd've done better with me of course, but ,,, all right, I'm kidding, I 'm kidding! Congratulations."

Rygel floated over to the crib, and John watched as the Hynerian's eyebrows relaxed and his mouth twitched upward in a smile. Then Rygel harumphed softly and glided back over to John, depositing something in the human's hand. "For her dowry," he said gruffly. "Half human, half Sebacean, she'll need all the help she can get."

John didn't know much about gems in this part of the universe, but it looked an awful lot like a diamond to him. And the fact that Rygel was willing to part with it said a lot. "Thank you, Rygel. I'll take good care of it for her."

"I think we had all better leave and let them sleep," Zhaan said, looking as fresh as ever despite all her work. "I'm famished â€“ anyone want to join me in the messroom?"

"You guys go ahead, I'll be along in a minute," John said. He watched his friends file out, smiling softly. He'd left behind everything he knew when he came here, and for many months wondered if he'd fit in. Now he wondered, if he went back to Earth, if he'd fit in there. It didn't really matter -- until the day came when they each went their separate ways, this was as good a home as he could wish for.

"Three years, Dad, and they've gone by in an eyeblink. Was it like that for you and Mom when I was growing up? And the time is coming

when Aeryn and I have to think about finding someplace permanent to settle. We owe it to Nora. I remember once you told me that home is what you make of it, and who you make it with. I don't think I understood that then, but I do now. As long as I have them, it won't matter where we are...."

"Daddy?" came a small voice. John switched off the recorder and looked up. Nora stood framed in the doorway, dark hair tousled. Boo, the toy that John couldn't think of as anything but a stuffed yak, her constant companion, was clutched in her arms. Chiana had given it to her, and John knew better than to ask where the little thief had acquired it. There were some things he slept better not knowing.

"And just what are you doing out of bed, young lady?"

"Couldn't sleep."

"Funny, it sure looked like you were sleeping a little while ago. Okay, come sit with me for a while. But be quiet â€“ we wake up your mom, she's gonna open up a can on both of us." Nora giggled and climbed into his lap, and John grunted. "You're getting heavy. How'd you get so big so fast?"

"I dunno. You making another letter to Grampa?"

"Uh-huh. You want to say hi?"

"Yeah." John switched the recorder on and held it for Nora. He listened as she chattered on for a minute about the day's events and thought for perhaps the millionth time what a miracle she was. He'd long since given up trying to figure out what he'd done to deserve her and her mother â€“ as Jack Crichton had been fond of saying, sometimes you just took what was handed to you and said thank you. He pressed his lips to the small dark head as Nora concluded, "Night, Grampa. I love you."

"Me, too, Dad. Good night." He stopped the recorder and cuddled his daughter against him. "You think you can try to go to sleep now?"

"If you sing me the bird song."

"The bird song, huh? I'd think you'd be sick of that by now. Okay, close your eyes, and think sleepy thoughts. Tell Boo to think sleepy thoughts, too, I don't want him keeping you awake." Nora laughed, wrapped her arms tighter around her friend, and laid her head against her father's chest. John smiled and began to sing softly:

_ "Hush, little Nora, don't say a word,_

—
Papa's gonna buy you a mockingbird

If that mockingbird don't sing

Papa's gonna buy you a diamond ring.... "

—

He felt his daughter grow heavier in his arms, and as he reached the final verse of the song, he heard another voice joining his, and let her finish the song:

_ "So hush, little Nora, don't say a word,_

—
Mama's gonna buy you a mock-ing-bird."

—
He felt a gentle hand stroking his hair and smiled up at his wife. "Talked you into it again, did she?" she whispered. "You know she has you wrapped around her little finger."

"There's worse places to be."

"Are you planning on coming to bed sometime tonight?"

"Let me get her tucked back in." John scooped Nora carefully into his arms, and she let out a small sigh as he settled her into her bed. Aeryn reached down to pull the blanket over her, and smoothed a strand of dark hair off her cheek. John wrapped his arms around her waist from behind and murmured in her ear, "Thank you, Aeryn."

"For what?"

"For loving me, for believing in me. For letting the miracle happen even though you were afraid. Any regrets?"

"Only when you snore."

"I don't!"

"You do. And one of these days I'm going to borrow that recorder of yours and prove it to you. But if you insist on thanking me, I insist that you do it properly."

"Oh, really. And just what did you have in mind?" he asked, nuzzling her neck.

She smiled and leaned her head back against his shoulder. "Mmm, that will do for starters. I'm sure your imagination can suggest a few other things."

"I can imagine quite a bit, but I think doing it's a lot more fun, don't you?" John turned her around and took her hand to lead her to their own chamber. "You know, we need to talk about having that implant removed...."

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End
file.